



**VIRGINIA WOOLF**  
**NUMERO SPECIALE**

a cura di Francesco Marroni

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*Mr Bennett, Mrs Woolf and Ms Drabble:  
A literary triangle*

The dialectical process of reaction and counter-action, of influence and rejection, of self-definition through the defining of others is an essential element in the history of the arts and of culture in general, since "No poet, no artist of any art, has his meaning alone" (1). If we accept that the whole of literature "has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. ... the past is altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past" (2), then exploring connections and interactions among writers belonging either to the same generation or to different ones will help us to trace those subtle alterations to the existing order that make a perpetual reassessment and reinterpretation of the whole tradition vitally necessary.

It might therefore be interesting, and possibly illuminating, to discuss a sort of triangular relationship and interaction, by way of opposition and/or influence, among three major novelists and critics who are all distinguished members of the English literary Pantheon: Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), Arnold Bennett (1867-1931) and Margaret Drabble (b. 1939). These three writers, each belonging to a different generation, may be seen as connected to each other in several ways. A. Bennett may be considered as the middle term between Woolf and Drabble, as the way they see him and react to his personality and work functions as a precarious,

1) T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent", in *The Sacred Wood* (1920) (London 1972), p. 49.

2) *Ibidem*, pp. 49, 50.



controversial link between them, while on the other hand both Bennett and Woolf have influenced Drabble and have been discussed by her separately.

This may also enable us to see what the author of some of the most innovative and original novels of our century can mean today to a woman who is a practising novelist, as distinguished from the legions of mostly feminist scholars who have recently rescued Woolf from a rather subordinate position in the modernist Pantheon ("a minor talent", working within "somehow narrow limits", and the like have been standard assessments till the 1970's) rightly stressing her centrality and significance, at the risk, however, of sometimes losing sight of the more specifically literary qualities of her achievement.

Finally, I also hope this may contribute to the discussion of an interesting (though in my opinion not of crucial relevance) issue, namely whether it is true or not that Virginia Woolf has not "made a tradition" that could be used by later practitioners (an accusation often levelled at her), and whether this would, in case, seriously, if not fatally, impair the value of her *oeuvre*.

Virginia Woolf, A. Bennett and M. Drabble have all received wide critical attention, at times bordering on adulation: though one must point out that Bennett's reputation is certainly no longer what it used to be in his lifetime, there have been signs of a revival of interest in him, and Drabble's long biography of him (1974) more than redresses the balance. The relationship between Bennett and Woolf sparked off a contention of the greatest import not just for the two writers involved, but also, or rather most of all, for the aesthetic formulations that were its most notable outcome. This *querelle* is possibly one of the most widely mentioned and discussed among the many that took place in the first half of the twentieth century, which is not surprising, since it does constitute a moment of great importance both for V. Woolf's literary career and for a redefinition of the novel.

## I

"On or about December 1910 human character changed" (3): the date mentioned by Virginia Woolf in her sustained attack against the cultural and literary establishment of the time which so signally failed to realise that nothing was, or could ever again be as it was before, was not chosen at random (4). A "constellation of significant events" clustered around it, all connected with breaking away from traditional art and conventional taste, such as the Post-impressionist Exhibition and the *furore* it caused, Diaghilev's Russian Ballet, and the appearance of works such as Frazer's first volumes (5). Associated with the traumatic experience of the war, this made the younger generation of artists acutely aware of the necessity for a radical change in outlook and technique, and they boldly proceeded to "make it new".

Dans l'aventure du genre romanesque, nous assistons depuis 1920 à des mutations aussi spectaculaires que celles de la vie organique au Tertiaire et au Quaternaire. ... nous devons observer la variété des espèces vivantes et survivantes, la prolifération des créations nouvelles ... dans ce charnier où cohabitent reptiles, oiseaux et premiers mammifères (6).

It is within this context of radical, at times almost violent innovation and challenge as against a complacent clinging to received ideas, stock responses and traditional literary forms, that Virginia Woolf must be placed, as she entered the current debate with determination and energy (and a certain undeniable *gusto*), thus exploding the myth of the Invalid Lady of Bloomsbury (7) so readily believed and exploited by A. Bennett and other hostile critics in the

3) V. Woolf, "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown" (1924), in *Collected Essays* (London 1966), I, p. 320.

4) Cf. W. Allen, *Tradition and Dream* (Penguin 1964), pp. 26-7.

5) See, e.g., J. Vickery, *The Literary Impact of the Golden Bough* (Princeton 1973).

6) R.M. Albérès, *Métamorphoses du roman* (Paris 1972), p.9.

7) Cf. E.M. Forster, "V. Woolf" (1941), in *Two Cheers for Democracy* (Penguin 1965), p. 249, and also W. Lewis' satires, such



popular press. It is sometimes forgotten that in her lifetime Woolf was regarded as one of the foremost critics of her day, regularly reviewing for the *TLS* and other influential journals: T.S. Eliot claimed she was "the centre of the literary life of London" (8), and even if he was probably slightly exaggerating there is no doubt that she was a well-established, respected literary figure whose criticism was invariably — and rightly — considered first-rate, even if at times her novels met with a mixed reception.

"Modern Fiction" (originally published as "Modern Novels" in 1919, and then reprinted, with some alterations, in *The Common Reader* (1925)), has been rightly considered the manifesto of the modernist novel, inspired by "certain gritudes and hostilities" while searching for tools with which to break the mould of fiction, and seek to capture what is truly significant — though at times evanescent, impalpable — in our experience. "Now, is life very solid, or very shifting?" Woolf asks in the *Diary*, and the question reappears, in various forms, throughout her novels and diaries (9): she finds that more commonly life is to be perceived as "shifting", a "luminous halo" in her famous formulation, and that new, far subtler strategies than the current ones have to be devised in order to break free from narrative conventions which dominate writers and perpetuate outworn, exhausted fictional forms — those "loose, baggy monsters" denounced by Henry James, who had already made the same complaints, and against the same writers, a few years before (10). Thus Woolf announces that her "quarrel is not with the classics", but very pointedly with some contemporary (yet out-of-date) practising novelists who, oblivious to the need for experiment

as *Men without Art* (1934).

8) Quoted in V. Woolf, *Women and Writing*, Introd. by M. Barrett (London 1979), p. 2.

9) For a perceptive assessment of the crucial significance of the *Diaries*, see A. Lombardo, "Il diario di V. Woolf" in *Ritratto di Enobarbo* (Pisa, 1971), pp. 320-42.

10) Cf. Henry James, "The Younger Generation" (1914), in *Notes on Novelists* (N. York 1916), pp. 320-24 *passim*. Discussing this essay, R. Wellek curiously takes it as an enthusiastic endorsement, on James' part, of Bennett's and Wells' brand of realism, which it obviously is not (cf. R. Wellek, *A History of Modern Criticism* (N. Haven 1965) IV, 268).

and change, keep producing the same sort of books year in, year out.

Bennett, Wells and Galsworthy are singled out and used as object lessons of what not to do, as they misuse their talent (and Bennett is "perhaps the worst culprit of the three, in as much as he is by far the best workman" (11)), spending immense skill and industry making "the trivial and the transitory appear the true and the enduring". Woolf criticises the Edwardians' preoccupation with sociological and economic issues as a substitute for the proper task of the novelist, which is to capture the spirit of life and not to devote all his time and energies to what Woolf elsewhere defines as "the appalling narrative business of the realist: getting on from lunch to dinner" (12). The realists represent life in a painstaking, but superficial and trivial way: this is why Bennett, Wells and Galsworthy are labelled "materialists", and while Bennett is singled out as the best of the trio, yet in this as in other essays Woolf makes it clear that his method is completely wrong. "Mr Bennett has to admit that he has been concerning himself unduly with inessentials... to achieve infantile realisms" (13): thus, after long pages of meticulous description, of faultless details, like H. James before her ("Yes, yes — but is this *all*?" (14)), Woolf asks — after mentioning Bennett's immense labours to catch life — "Is it worth while? What is the point of it all?... Life escapes..." (15).

Edwardian practice, though competent in workmanship, is deficient in life, and the three novelists mentioned have complacently accepted "materialism", i.e. a superficial form of realism — what Wallace Stevens defines "a corruption of reality" — as a substitute for looking at life differently, in depth, and devising a way of rendering this new perception of the "vraie vérité". The 1925 version of "Modern Fiction", then, represents a rejection of material realism, of "the smooth falsity of contemporary middle-brow fiction and also

11) V. Woolf, "Modern Fiction" (1919), in *Collected Essays*, II, 104.

12) Quoted in M. Rosenthal, *V. Woolf* (London 1979), p. 44.

13) V. Woolf, "Books and Persons" (1917), in *Contemporary Writers*, with a Preface by J. Guiguet (London 1965), p. 62.

14) H. James, p. 328.

15) "Modern Fiction", 105. For V. Woolf (Firenze 1981) Woolf and "real" life cf. M. Mancioni Billi, *V. Woolf* (Firenze 1981), p. 87.



the idea of artificial form" (16). Against all this, V. Woolf pits J. Joyce as the champion of the Moderns (17): shortly after, she herself would enter the lists with *Jacob's Room* (1922), her first decisive break with tradition.

Though Woolf had already denounced Bennett's Edwardian realism in her review of his *Books and Persons* in 1917, he seemed to take no notice at all of the younger writer's criticism till March 1923, when he decided to retaliate. In an article entitled "Is the Novel Decaying?", Bennett first mentioned Woolf, whom later he described as "The real champion of the younger school... she alone, so far as I know, came forward and attacked the old" (18), and after expressing his conviction that the novel could not survive unless the new novelists, clever and often original, devoted serious attention to character-drawing, he said that *Jacob's Room*, though "exquisitely written" and "bursting with originality", clearly would not do, since "the characters do not vitally survive in the mind, because the author has been obsessed by details of originality and cleverness" (19). That was all, but it was enough for V. Woolf.

It certainly seems inaccurate, as well as reductive, to see "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown" (1924), of which two different versions were written, as well as the 1925 variant of "Modern Fiction" (coloured by now by Bennett's criticism of her characterisation), as Woolf's "overreaction" to a short paragraph of criticism. Some critics openly siding with Bennett stress her hurt pride and vanity, her "gratuitous cruelty and aggressiveness", her lack of generosity and class bias in her treatment of Bennett, presented as an "ageing lion" good-humouredly and patiently putting up with the attacks of a representative of the younger generation, "armed to the teeth" (20).

16) T. Davenport, "The Life of Monday or Tuesday", in V. Woolf: *New Critical Essays*, eds. P. Clements and I. Grundy (London 1983), p. 162.

17) For Woolf and Joyce, see Maria Di Battista, "Joyce, Woolf and the Modern Mind" in *ibidem*, pp. 96-114.

18) *Evening Standard* (2 Dec. 1926), p. 5. This and other reviews by Bennett have been reprinted in V. Woolf: *The Critical Heritage*, eds. R. Majumdar and A. Mc Laurin (London 1975). See also the Introduction, especially pp. 16-20, 22-4, 36.

19) *Cassell's Weekly*, II (28 March 1923), 47.

20) Cf. S. Hynes, "The Whole Contention Between Mr Bennett

This is a misrepresentation of the quarrel, which has been widely if not always objectively discussed: though Bennett was quite pleasant to Woolf when they met socially, he kept attacking and ridiculing her in print, contributing to the caricature of her as the high priestess of letters officiating in her Bloomsbury ivory tower and regularly repeating, each time she published a new book, that it failed since she could not create memorable, living characters (21). It is arguable whether it is more generous to dub somebody "Queen of the High-Brows" publicly in a newspaper, or to "sneer" at somebody privately in one's diary (22), but in any case all this is largely irrelevant: what is much more important is the critical issue raised, characterisation, since by choosing this particular point Bennett "had inadvertently chosen the battlefield for the quarrel" (23).

The famous passage in the *Diary* recording Woolf's reaction to Bennett's strictures is often cited as an instance of her revengeful brooding over his offense, while it is clear that his objection had touched off a process of introspection and self-criticism:

People, like A. Bennett, say I can't create, or didn't in *Jacob's Room*, characters that survive. ... I daresay it's

and Mrs Woolf in *Edwardian Occasions* (N. York 1972), pp. 36, 32, and M. Drabble, *A. Bennett. A Biography* (London 1974), p. 293. Equally hostile to Woolf appears to be J. Kreutz, "Mr Bennett and Mrs Woolf", *Modern Fiction Studies* VIII (Summer 1962), 103-15, while M. Goldman, in his able and well-documented *The Reader's Art: V. Woolf as Literary Critic* (The Hague/Paris 1976) provides a far more balanced account of the *querelle* (ch.2).

21) This has always been one of the major charges against Woolf (even Forster was on Bennett's side in this respect, praising the characterisation of *The Old Wives' Tale* as far above anything Woolf might attain (cf. "V. Woolf", p. 257). Nowadays, however, a better understanding of Woolf's aims and technique (see, eg. Rosenthal, pp. 80-1, and A. Inglis, "V. W. et la critique", in V. Woolf *et le Groupe de Bloomsbury*, ed. J. Guiguet (Paris 1977), pp. 221-3) allows us to disregard this charge as irrelevant.

22) Cf. Hynes, p. 36.

23) *Ibidem*, p. 28.



true, however, that I haven't that "reality" gift. I insubstantize, willfully to some extent, distrusting reality — its cheapness (24).

She reacted as any artist is likely to react when his work has been criticised by an elder, influential practitioner of the craft, a successful exponent of what for her was a dated, inadequate form of art: indeed, she makes it clear (though indirectly) that it is precisely the popular success of such traditional writers that makes it impossible for them to realise the need for new, original forms and the importance of experimentation.

It has been rightly suggested that Bennett's antifeminist stance may well have reinforced Woolf's objections to him, giving a sharper edge to her hostility to his literary values (25). Though M. Drabble roundly condemns feminists and suffragettes of the time for not having shown proper gratitude for his championship (26), the book of essays entitled *Our Women* (1920), one of his most popular works which attracted a great deal of attention in the press, hardly presents Bennett in a light calculated to make him more acceptable to V. Woolf. The essays, mainly devoted to outlining women's domestic responsibilities and to advising them as to how best realise their primary function of soothing the troubled male mind, are variations on this basic text: "In creation, in synthesis, in criticism, in pure intellect women, even the most exceptional and the most favoured have never approached the accomplishment of men" (27). All this, Drabble tell us, is said "with an air of bravado", and his manner is "friendly enough", while moreover "he concedes that things may change in a thousand years or so" (28); regrettably, however, V. Woolf decided to spurn such a "powerful ally", and greatly resented the general burden of the book, which she brilliantly and most cogently refuted in *A Room of One's Own* (1929). An anticipation of the central argument of that book is to

24) *The Diary of V. Woolf*, ed. A. Oliver Bell (Penguin 1977), II, 248.

25) Cf. M. Minow-Pinkney, *V. Woolf and the Problem of the Subject* (Brighton 1987), p. 6.

26) Cf. Drabble, p. 216.

27) A. Bennett, *Our Women* (London 1920), p. 104. See also pp. 91, 148, 282.

28) Drabble, p. 216.

be found in the two spirited letters she wrote to the *New Statesman* (shortly after its columnist "Affable Hawk" (D. Mac Carthy) had reviewed *Our Women* very favourably), which advance persuasive counter-arguments and show considerable polemical virtuosity. They were published in the correspondence column, and after the second letter the dour (and apparently male chauvinist) "Affable Hawk", though still unconvinced, rather ungraciously decided to drop the matter (29). Again, as in the case of the literary differences, Bennett worked as a sort of catalyst for Woolf's ideas, and while his type of fiction and his objections to Woolf's caused her to think out and formulate a coherent theory of the modernist novel, likewise his attitude to women stimulated her to a reasoned and strategic attempt to rupture both an oppressive, traditional patriarchal ideology and its literary analogue, a superficial, shallow and "materialistic" form of fiction.

Of course neither "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown" nor "Modern Fiction" was ever intended as "a binding prescription for novelists to follow or a theoretical scheme" (30), and it would be absurd to see these essays as the diktat of the "Queen of Bloomsbury" (Bennett again) insisting on the hegemony of the modernist novel. Striving towards self-definition, which involves a confrontation with the immediate, Edwardian past and a rejection of the models and techniques it offered, V. Woolf was here exploring new possibilities for the novel and struggling to gain respectability and recognition for her own work. These essays are both occasional, polemical pieces written to counterattack Bennett, his derogatory criticism and his offensive ideas on women, and a manifesto where Woolf made some important statements on the nature of the novel, her kind of novel, the one she felt was right for the new times.

... The problem before the novelist at present, as we suppose it to have been in the past, is to contrive means of being free to set down what he chooses. He has to have

29) Cf. *Diary*, II, 339-40. Woolf had noted (p. 69) that she was preparing a paper on women "as a counterblast to Mr Bennett's adverse views reported in the papers", but for the time being only the two letters were written.

30) Rosenthal, p. 252.



the courage to say that what interests him is no longer "this" but "that": out of "that" alone must he construct his work. For the moderns "that", the point of interest, lies very likely in the dark places of psychology (31).

It has been suggested that Bennett, Wells and Galsworthy were in fact "straw men" she chose to attack in order to make her manifesto more striking and provocative, while other critics, on the contrary, maintain that it was precisely to have her revenge on Bennett that Woolf theorised, in order to disguise her spiteful attack clothing it in metaphysical meditations on the state of the novel (32). It would seem, however, that though V. Woolf admittedly did not relish adverse, very damaging criticism from the best-known and influential man of letters of the time, and certainly struck back with great skill and effectiveness, she was equally, if not more, concerned with looking into attitudes and devices, accepted as a matter of fact for so long, that now had come to look false, and with denouncing, like Proust, "la fausseté même de l'art prétendu réaliste". Woolf's polemic against "stultifying Edwardian realism" (33) is thus also a declaration of literary identity: she felt and communicated to others the urgency of technical innovation "as a means to modern truth" (34) which mainstream, traditional novelists continued to ignore.

Moreover, Bennett, Wells and Galsworthy could well be said to represent the literary establishment at its most entrenched, conventional and popular: with the exception of Galsworthy, they had already seemed so to James, and they appeared dismissive, when not clearly hostile, to younger writers who did not intend to go on, as James has said of Bennett, "hugging the shore of the real" but boldly set out to sail on deep, uncharted waters, "the dark places of psychology", exploring and experimenting. As Frank Kermode has said,

31) "Modern Fiction", 108.

32) Cf. Phyllis Rose, *Woman of Letters. A Life of V. Woolf* (London 1978), p. 98; Hynes and Kreutz, *passim*.

33) Minow-Pinkney, p. 26. See also V. Amoroso, *V. Woolf* (Bari 1968), p. 105.

34) *Ibidem*.

the whole history of the novel in our century is dominated by the notion that "technical changes of a radical kind are necessary to preserve a living relation between the book and the world" (35): since it did not appear that the Edwardians were aware of the need for such changes and insisted on the kind of sociological realism of which Bennett was the best known practitioner, they were a most appropriate target for an artist like Virginia Woolf, who refused routine literary products and stock responses. This is why when reading V. Woolf or the other great revolutionaries of the century, Proust and Joyce, one has a sense of exploration, of immediate relevance, of reading a master "who uses the medium instead of being used by it, and who stretches it a little further with each new attempt" (36).

## II

Till 1972, V. Woolf seemed firmly placed as an interesting but minor modern writer whose "innovative fictional techniques were clearly important" (37), but not sufficient to grant her the status of a major novelist. The tone for Woolfian criticism had been set, seemingly once for all, in the late 1930's and 1940's by F.R. Leavis and his wife: there is no doubt that "the Leavises and *Scrutiny*... have been responsible for forming the taste of several generations of readers" (38), and that this taste was decidedly anti-Woolf. In 1932 *Scrutiny* published a scathing critique of her work by a brilliant, young Cambridge graduate, M.C. Bradbrook (39), while Leavis

35) F. Kermode, "The English Novel, circa 1907", in *Twentieth-Century Literature in Retrospect*, ed. R.A. Brower (Cambridge, Mass. 1971), p. 52.

36) G. Josipovici, *The World and the Book* (London 1971), p. 245.

37) A. Zwerdling, *V. Woolf and the Real World* (Berkeley 1986), p. 1.

38) J. Marcus, "No More Horses: V. Woolf on Art and Propaganda", in *Critical Essays on V. Woolf*, ed. M. Beja (Boston, Mass. 1985), p. 168 n. 10.

39) For Woolf's reaction, see *Diary*, IV, 101. Having in the course of several decades changed her mind about V. Woolf, Professor Bradbrook has recently refused permission to reprint her 1932 essay.



repeatedly attacked her, complaining that she

seems to shut out all the ranges of experience accompanying those kinds of preoccupations, volitional and moral, with an external world which are not felt primarily as preoccupation with one's consciousness of it (40).

This was to be repeated, with little variation, by most English intellectuals whose formative years were spent under the aegis of Dr Leavis, and it is also significant that of all her novels he praised only *To the Lighthouse*, ("her only good one") thereafter predictably singled out by critic after critic as "her best". In the 1960's and even later the Leavisite attitude to Woolf and her work was still predominant in current critical opinion, as can be seen by some representative brief assessments written by leading critics like Walter Allen, M. Bradbury, G.S. Fraser or the lesser known but pretentious F.W. Bradbrook, to name but a few. No one could seriously afford to ignore her when dealing with modernism, but if no longer openly attacked she was clearly, most of the times, "damn'd with faint praise".

In order to understand Margaret Drabble's attitude to the literature of the past in general, and to V. Woolf in particular, it may be helpful to examine briefly how the modernist novel came to be marginalised or downright rejected in the Fifties, when Drabble was completing her education at Cambridge. In these years the critical climate in England presented many features in common with, say, France, where in the 1950's a new literary generation — bred on Mauriac, J. Green, Bernanos, Camus and Sartre — required in fiction a «contenu significant... le roman "tragique" exprimait alors pour nous la condition humaine, et tout s'ordonnait dans cette perspective moraliste où un Proust et un Joyce apparaissent comme des esthètes aberrants» (41). Likewise, in England a new literary generation — bred mainly (though not exclusively) by F.R. Leavis and his disciples — turned away from, or against Joyce, Woolf and Dorothy Richardson, charging them with triviality, irrelevance and irresponsibility, in a word with lack of a "contenu signifiant".

40) Quoted in *Women and Writing*, p. 29.

41) Albérès, p. 10.

The debate about what the English novel should be like in the 1950's was mainly concerned with the rejection of what were by now considered, for various reasons, inappropriate models, and this meant James Joyce and Virginia Woolf: the most influential dismissal came from F.R. Leavis and C.P. Snow, for once surprisingly in agreement in denouncing the stream-of-consciousness novel as a dead end, an irresponsible conjuring trick leading to the disintegration of all values in literature, and, finally, in the moral life of society. Snow described, in his customary simplistic and reductive way, the innovations of Joyce and Woolf as "a method, the essence of which was to represent brute experience through moments of sensation" (42), and his strictures were echoed by many other writers, as for instance Kingsley Amis, who seems to express the typical period objections to the modernist novel when he complains that "Experiment" in this context boils down pretty regularly to "obtruded oddity", whether in construction ... or in style" (43).

Leavis by teaching and writing, Snow also by his own fiction both loudly denounced, adopting a high moral tone, the pernicious heritage of those nasty, trifling times, "the avantgarde of ten or twenty years ago", and of such nasty triflers as V. Woolf, whom Snow repeatedly attacked, pronouncing the experimental novel "as dead as cold potatoes". He praised novelists like Doris Lessing, W. Cooper, Francis King, K. Amis and a few others (his taste was clearly more catholic than Leavis'), as their attitude to their art was "much tougher than that of their immediate predecessors" (44). The novels of these writers, for the most part aggressively affecting "a robust new provincialism" (45), like Snow's own fiction are clearly intended to make a decisive break with the effete trends inaugurated by Modernism, by returning to the mainstream of nineteenth-century English realism, Leavis' "Great Tradition", since "The novel only breathes freely when it has its roots in society". Leavis' brightest luminary

42) Quoted in R. Rabinowitz, *The Reaction Against Experiment in the English Novel 1950-1960* (N. York/London 1967), p. 98. For C.P. Snow and the modernist novel, see also B. Bergonzi, *The Situation of the Novel* (Penguin 1970), pp. 160-3.

43) *Ibidem*, p. 40.

44) Quoted in P. West, *The Modern Novel* (London 1965), I, 44.

45) *Ibidem*.



was George Eliot: her achievement, so deservedly and sonorously praised, was to haunt some of his more talented students, such as M. Drabble and her elder sister A.S. Byatt, also a gifted and well-known novelist, who both not only greatly admire George Eliot, but have also consciously aimed at writing the *Middlemarch* of our times (46).

Another distinguished practitioner who started writing after 1945 and shares C.P. Snow's attitude to the craft of fiction is Angus Wilson (also greatly admired by Drabble), a well-known author who helped re-establish the novel as the vehicle for a particular liberal ideology, aiming at moral clarity and relevance: moral preoccupations rather than problems of form engage the writer's attention, and the reader is constantly invited to ponder questions of responsibility and guilt. Such atmosphere of serious questioning, of nostalgic looking back to a realistic tradition of moral earnestness and a capacious, solid form, could only be inimical to the reputation of the modernist writers, either attacked or more or less ignored. Curiously, Drabble resembles Wilson not only in the kind of fiction she wants to write, but also in her attitude to V. Woolf, whom Wilson (predictably) started by disliking, while some years ago — again like Drabble — he changed his mind about her.

Interestingly though not surprisingly, the 1950's also saw a revival of interest in the triumvirate, heralded by W. Allen's short book on Bennett (1948) whose reputation, that had declined steadily from the mid-Twenties, revived modestly but noticeably in the following years, in association with the neo-Edwardian movement (J. Wain, Braine and Amis). J. Wain and A. Wilson both published appreciative essays on him, and Wilson also favourably reviewed Drabble's biography of the novelist, who certainly at the time appeared to her and others much more congenial as a model for the kind of realism these neo-Edwardians aimed at than the despised modernist techniques (47).

46) For Drabble, cf. e.g. P. Firchow, *A Writer's Place* (Minneapolis 1974) p. 106; for Byatt, see O. Kenyon, *Women Novelists Today* (Brighton 1988), p. 54.

47) A. Wilson, "A Man from the Midlands", *TLS* 12 July 1974, 737-8. Cf. W. Bellamy, *The Novels of Wells, Bennett and Galsworthy: 1890-1910* (London 1971), p. 215. See also *Modernismo / Modernismi* a cura di G. Cianci (Milano 1991), p. 24.

In the 1960's and 1970's, though A.S. Byatt affirms that the avantgarde of those years "rejected the rejection" of modernism of the earlier decade (48), the ideological stance inherited from the 1950's still coloured most criticism of Woolf, which kept showing traces of prejudice and many important reservations, though these were often disguised now by a more respectful tone. Arnold Kettle, "assoiffé de contenu et de foi" (49) — as he has been aptly defined — may be seen as typical, but among the many, often extremely influential critics who wrote on her during this period, such as Malcolm Bradbury and others already mentioned, the distinguished biographer Michael Holroyd, whose massive study of Lytton Strachey and the Bloomsbury Group (1967) was handsomely praised by Leonard Woolf, deserves to be quoted, if briefly.

Her novels... are delvings into the sick, neurasthenic depths of her nature. ... She breathed in oxygen and gave out in her novels only carbon dioxide. ... Sometimes she comes little nearer to the wonder of real love than ... a medical analysis of the menstrual cycle (50).

Other critics are possibly a little more restrained, but derogatory or patronising remarks and overtones are quite frequent: though translated into English in 1953, not even Auerbach's memorable and illuminating essay, which places Woolf firmly within the great tradition of European realism in the wider sense of the term while stressing the profound relevance of her work, had much influence on critical opinion in Britain.

The publication of Quentin Bell's biography in 1972 however may well be seen as a turning-point in the course of V. Woolf's critical reputation, most of all since this widely acclaimed work revealed the existence of an enormous body

48) A.S. Byatt, "People in Paper Houses: Attitudes to 'Realism' and 'Experiment' in English Postwar Fiction", in *The Contemporary English Novel*, ed. M. Bradbury (London 1979), p. 19.

49) Inglis, 225; cf. A. Kettle, *An Introduction to the English Novel* (1953) (London 1972), 2, Part II, ch.3.

50) M. Holroyd, *Lytton Strachey and the Bloomsbury Group* (1967) (Penguin 1971), p. 27.



of unpublished material of the highest order — diaries, memoirs, letters — and suggested that all this material, once published, “would substantially alter our sense of her achievement” (51). This is precisely what has happened, and in consequence there has been a vigorous revival of critical interest in various aspects of V. Woolf’s *oeuvre*: this reflects both the objective necessity to reassess her work in the light of this important new material, and the intellectual preoccupations typical of the late 1970’s and the 1980’s, such as the feminist slant that informs a large proportion of contemporary Woolfian studies. Ironically, Woolf — after having been frequently attacked or dismissed for the alleged lack of social or political perspective in her work — during the 1980’s has been “most vociferously praised, especially by feminist critics” (52) precisely from that perspective. In 1983, two Woolfian scholars still felt there was “a lack of consensus about [Woolf’s] degree or even her kind of stature” (53): nine years later, I believe we can say that the consensus is much wider, and that in any case she will never again be returned to that limbo of “interesting minor writers” to which she was relegated in the central decades of our century.

### III

Margaret Drabble, who has been publishing with success distinguished novels and criticism for the past thirty years, may be seen in many respects as the typical representative of that younger generation of serious novelists who started writing in the early 1960’s, had impeccable academic credentials (in her case, a starred first in English at Cambridge), and whose natural reaction against their immediate predecessors — J. Joyce and V. Woolf — took the less customary (though no less predictable) form of pretending they had never existed and of going further back to older, more respectable ancestors. The reaction against experiment that had been at the centre of the literary debate in the 1950’s was accepted unquestioningly by the clever, earnest pupils of dr Leavis, who lorded it over undergraduates (and others)

51) Zwerdling, p. 2.

52) *Critical Essays on V. Woolf*, Introd., p. 4.

53) *Woolf: New Critical Essays*, Introd., p. 9.

when Drabble was at Cambridge, and safer, morally relevant models were sought in the Great Tradition. Drabble, who confesses to having “this awful leaning towards the conventional novel” and to preferring “a good, traditional tale”, those “loose, baggy monsters” so distasteful to H. James, is very pleased when compared with George Eliot, and has very firmly placed herself in the mainstream tradition of the English novel. Her literary roots are clearly Victorian and Edwardian, and she feels her consciousness of working in the Great Tradition “anchors her more firmly to the main concerns of life” (54). She is frankly a realist, and has always proclaimed her allegiance to Bennett’s brand of realism while stating quite clearly her attitude to modernism:

I don’t want to write an experimental novel to be read by people in fifty years, who will say, ah, well, yes, she foresaw what was coming. I’m just not interested. I’d rather be at the end of a dying tradition, which I admire, than at the beginning of a tradition which I deplore (55).

This was in 1967, which considering the trend of critical opinion still obtaining then, confirms Drabble as a perfect specimen of the British *intelligentsia* bred in the 1950’s, though she does show some independence from dr Leavis in her passionate admiration for Bennett. As the third, youngest vertex of our triangle, by her response to our two other novelists, Bennett and Woolf, Drabble can help us to define generational clashes or cross-influences among some very different, though all extremely influential, attitudes to the novel and its tradition.

Margaret Drabble had already written a bestseller (*The Millstone* (1965), her third novel) when still under thirty and has been alternating fiction with criticism, reviewing, editing, and a very lively participation in British cultural life. Her several novels have the distinction of selling very well, while also being the subject of much critical commentary: she may be said, in fact, to have achieved wide recognition both in the

54) G. Cunningham, “Women and Children First: The Novels of M. Drabble” in *Twentieth-Century Women Novelists*, ed. T. Staley (London 1985), p. 131.

55) M. Drabble in a 1967 radio interview, quoted in D.J. Taylor’s provocative *A Vain Conceit* (London 1989), pp. 50-1.



market place and academe. One of the reasons for her popularity was her excellent sense of timing: she attracted immediate interest by producing in the early 1960's several novels dealing with women's personal experiences, crises and conflicts just shortly before this became a very popular topic, and thus elicited a ready response. She has been described by V.G. Myer as "a highbrow with a shrewd commercial sense, an intellectual wolf in middlebrow sheep's clothing" (56): this seems to me largely correct, and may help explain the uncommon feat of her being widely read and well received by both the general public and scholarly critics.

Though remarkably sophisticated, Drabble's style and technique are apparently quiet and unassuming: she aims at clarity and shows a keen eye for social detail, while the texture of her novels gains density and depth from her deft and unobtrusive use of intertextuality and literary allusion. Thus, while some of her critics do tend to make rather large claims for her, like Phyllis Rose who thinks Drabble is the Dickens and the Balzac of our times, or V.G. Myer who believes that she "fulfils the condition of greatness" for (among other things) her "bardic voice" (57), we may agree with more sedate evaluations that place her among "the most intelligent and artistically satisfying of contemporary writers" (58).

Drabble openly acknowledges Bennett as one of her masters, especially as regards *Jerusalem the Golden* (1967), and has written "in a partisan spirit, as an act of appreciation" (59) a long, detailed biography (published, after years of meticulous research, in 1974) of the Edwardian novelist, to whom she also feels many personal and temperamental affinities. It would seem that in her eyes Bennett could do no wrong, both in his literary and personal life, and Drabble seems to seize every opportunity to praise and defend him:

He was a great writer from a stony land, and ... also one of the kindest and most unselfish of men. Many a time, reading a novel, reading a letter or a piece of his

56) V.G. Myer, *M. Drabble. A Reader's Guide* (London/N. York 1991), p.60.

57) *Ibidem*, p.12.

58) Cunningham, p. 151.

59) M. Drabble, *Bennett*, p. vii.

journal, I have wanted to shake his hand, or to thank him, to say well done (60).

While Drabble's attitude to Bennett has been fairly consistent through the years, the same cannot be said of the way she relates to Virginia Woolf. At first she conscientiously wrote Woolf off as the snobbish author of some precious, pretentious and irrelevant novels which, on her own admission, she had not even bothered to read. In 1969, however, as she herself has repeatedly told readers and interviewers, for some unspecified reason Drabble started reading *A Room of One's Own*, and had a change of heart.

Drabble's belated discovery of V. Woolf is related with some emotion in an article first published in 1972 and later reprinted twice (61): in it we find a handsome recantation of her former prejudices and strictures, as well as intelligent appreciation of Woolf's art and personality. The article, more in the order of an informal tribute than of a critical reassessment, makes several interesting points which help us place V. Woolf in the critical climate of the early 1970's, seen by a practising novelist who is a "cautious feminist" (62), an *engagé* writer who also knows, instinctively, on which side her intellectual bread is buttered.

The general tone of the 1972 article on Woolf may owe something to its being published in the *Harper's Bazaar*, a sophisticated, high-quality women's magazine with some intellectual pretensions but obviously not an academic or specialised literary review. Drabble seems genuinely moved by her experience of "discovering" Woolf, and frightened by the possibility of never running across her, now that somehow all the ingrained prejudices and the facile *clichés* about the "Queen of Bloomsbury", with her mythical court of retainers,

60) *Ibidem*, p. 356.

61) M. Drabble, "V. Woolf", *Harper's Bazaar*, Sept. '72, 90—1,128; reprinted, slightly abridged, as "How not to be Afraid of V. Woolf", *MS Nov.* '72, 68-70, 72, 121. Finally printed as a booklet (a limited edition of 110 signed copies), *V. Woolf: A Personal Debt* (N.York 1973). Cf. J.S. Koremann, "A.M. Drabble Bibliography" (to 1983), in *Critical Essays on M. Drabble*, ed. E.C. Rose (Boston, Mass. 1985), pp. 181-202.

62) D. Cooper-Clark, "M. Drabble: Cautious Feminist" in *ibidem*, p. 19.



have been miraculously and suddenly exploded. "I might never have met her: as one feels with some alarm of a friend whom one meets by accident and comes to love by chance" (63). Drabble manages to convey the feeling she has found a long-lost sister, another woman and writer whom only circumstances and naive ignorance had kept away from her while they were perfectly attuned as to their concerns and ideology.

Drabble quite frankly acknowledges that it was no question of her reading, say, *The Waves* and suddenly realising that what she most wanted to do in life was write precisely that way: rather, she sought confirmation in Woolf's fiction of her stature as an "excellent fighter", someone holding the key to the "brave new world of liberation". She finally discovered, after feeling shame for "the meanness and gracelessness" of her first judgement, that her novels are "haunting. They work in the mind long after they are on the shelf": they are "wonderful, various... they contain everything".

Drabble thinks Woolf was rejected "by succeeding generations" for her depiction of "a trivial domestic world", as it might seem to untutored eyes, while this was precisely one of the sources of her strength, and stresses the importance of her influence:

There has been hardly a writer who has not been affected by her. Her fluid sentence structure, her poetic prose, her perceptions of the slightest connections, her lack of interest in a heavy conventional narrative, her passion for the inconsequential psychological detail — all these things have gone into the novel and remained there.

This is an interesting and perceptive assessment of Woolf's influence, though Drabble does not make it clear whether she acknowledges such influence herself or not. Equally interesting and again typical of more recent trends in Woolfian criticism, is her preference for *The Years*, often seen in the past as a step backwards from her greatest achievement, *The Waves*, while now being appreciated for its social and political perspective. It is the novel she admires most, precisely for the reason why it was an indisputable bestseller when it first

63) Drabble, "V. Woolf", p. 90.

came out, while later it was seen as a minor work: "a long novel, with a large cast, spanning more than half a century... one of her more traditional...".

The article, which shows a sympathetic insight into V. Woolf's art, manages to recreate her for us as a luminous, inspiring presence, while stressing the fertilising influence of her work for modern women who want to be artists, writers, novelists: Drabble, pointing out how uncannily Woolf anticipated the present-day situation of women like herself, concludes with a moving tribute:

She imagined us, and we owe her our existence. We have not yet reached the future she envisaged, and which her moment in history denied her, but she helped to create it. We owe it to her to survive (64).

It is doubtless no coincidence that Drabble's change of heart, though occurring a little earlier, was made public precisely after Quentin Bell's first volume and one month before the second came out, as emphasised by the half-title of her article, which explains that because of Bell's biography interest in Woolf's work had "never been greater" — again, her timing was perfect. It is also easy to understand why Drabble approached Woolf via *A Room of One's Own*, just the right sort of text for a moderate feminist with literary preoccupations. She has been increasingly assessed by critics in terms of women's, and especially of V. Woolf's, writing and as she told P. Firchow

I do feel... very closely connected with a literary tradition of some sort or another. Of women writers, possibly. I read V. Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* for the first time two or three months ago and I felt so in sympathy with everything she said about the tradition of women writing and where it's going. And I know that's what I'm part of (65).

Again and again, Drabble has made it quite clear that she had got to V. Woolf very late ("I completely missed her.

64) *Ibidem*, pp. 90, 91, 128.

65) Firchow, p. 114.



She was very unfashionable in the fifties and sixties, and I never read a word") (66), which made it impossible for her to have been influenced by Woolf before, say, 1970. V.G. Myer, however, has found direct echoes of *Mrs Dalloway* in *The Waterfall* (1969), and she surmises (probably rightly) that Drabble had already "skimmed Woolf earlier, but only read her with appreciation and mature understanding at a later date" (67). Several other critics in fact have claimed that she is consciously Woolf's heir: in 1980, e.g., Fred Hauptfuhrer published an article entitled "England's New V. Woolf? Some Say It's Maggie Drabble", while in 1983 three out of four speakers at the MLA Special Session on Drabble considered Woolf's influence on her as central (68).

Drabble is however careful to disclaim very close literary similarities:

I wouldn't like to be a poetic novelist in the sense that V. Woolf is. I admire V. Woolf enormously, but I would rather that there were a more real, normal level of experience, and level of prose going through the novel than V. Woolf ever provides one with (69).

Structural and stylistic affinities have however been identified by critics, such as a modified use of the stream of consciousness, especially in the first-person narratives: we find direct references to Woolf and her work in several novels, such as *The Realm of Gold* whose prose rhythms are haunted by Woolf's and *The Middle Ground*, which ends with "a Mrs Dalloway-type party", "a literary joke" as Drabble calls it. The party serves, in this as in other novels, as an emblem of order and community "in a world of ugly chaos", just as happens in Woolf's fiction. Though an important point of contact is the way both novelists see the problem of female writing, Woolf is also of great value to Drabble in a more specifically literary way: D.L. Higdon, while discussing Drabble's extensive use of allusions to other writers in her

66) I. Rozencwajg, "Interview with M. Drabble", *Women's Studies*, 6 (1979), p. 336.

67) Myer, p.86.

68) *Critical Essays on M. Drabble*, p.17, n. 31.

69) British Council recorded interview (1977) with Myer, quoted in Myer, p. 62.

work, affirms that "V. Woolf has a peculiar importance in her canon", as his analysis of the formal strategy adopted in *The Realms of Gold* bears out (70).

Though she may admire V. Woolf "enormously", whenever discussing her in connection with Bennett Drabble becomes immediately defensive, and invariably sides with him, attacking or criticising Woolf with a noticeable lack of sympathy. Thus when discussing the Woolf-Bennett feud in her biography of the Edwardian novelist, she quotes approvingly John Bayley who "convincingly criticises V. Woolf herself for the decay of fiction through the plotless, characterless claustrophobic monologue" (71). This seems a far cry, indeed, from the rather splendid praise of her influence on the modern novel as voiced in the article published two years earlier: we are then treated to a series of contrasts, such as "Which of them was wordly, which unwordly, Bennett with his yacht and his well-cut suit, Virginia with her snobbery and migraines?" or "His was the sensitivity of a deprived working-class child, not of an upper-class aesthete" (72).

Aside from Drabble's blind spot for Bennett, the socially committed, moralistic and anti-Bloomsbury stance is still unmistakably Leavisite, and it will surface also later in some interviews, where the key word "community" is significantly used. Still contrasting Bennett and Woolf whenever given the opportunity, and in marked contradiction to some passages in her 1972 article, Drabble insists that his fictional range is wider and "more nourishing ... A. Bennett tells you things that V. Woolf simply didn't know". Yet, though a bit grudgingly, in the end she concedes that of the two, she supposes V. Woolf is "the greater writer" (73).

"Certainly, the most interesting and compelling of contemporary novelists still tend to be those who have felt challenged by the great moderns" (74): the question of Virginia Woolf's influence on the English writers of the present time is of great interest and has been ably discussed during her Centenary Conference (1982) at Cambridge by a panel of

70) Cf. *Critical Essays on M. Drabble*, Introd., pp. 10-11.

71) Drabble, *Bennett*, p. 292.

72) *Ibidem*, p. 293.

73) Cooper-Clark, p. 25.

74) *Critical Essays on V. Woolf*, Introd., p. 5.



critics and novelists (75). The conclusions reached then were that though not widely influential stylistically, Woolf is influential in several other ways and has great relevance for novelists today, having created enormous possibilities for fiction that have hardly yet been absorbed. According to R. Poole, without Joyce and Woolf (and Proust) there would not be twentieth-century fiction "in the way we know it, whatever name you name", while Gillian Beer maintained that "There are writers who are not cumbersomely indebted to V. Woolf, who have skinned out possibilities that were presented by her" (76). It would seem, thus, that Woolf did create a tradition, whether of women's writing or more generally by pointing forward to the future in her work and transmitting ideas and strategies that could be used by later novelists.

If such is the case, then nobody shows this better, in her attitudes and her own work, than Margaret Drabble, who in the tensions between different, indeed often contrasting models, has found her own voice. In *The Waterfall*, in some ways her most experimental and Woolfian novel, the fertilising effect of (finally) reading Woolf freed Drabble "to reconcile the empiricist tradition of Bennett with the subjectivity, sensitivity and symbolism of Virginia Woolf" (77): this may well apply to Drabble's later work as well, and our triangle confirms how a significant pattern may emerge from a complex tangle of relationships, reactions, rejections and influences. It also confirms that after fifty years Virginia Woolf is still indispensable to us.

75) Cf. V.W. A *Centenary Perspective*, ed. E. Warner (London 1984), pp. 146-65.

76) *Ibidem*, pp. 161, 163.

77) Myer, p. 60.